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TATTOO

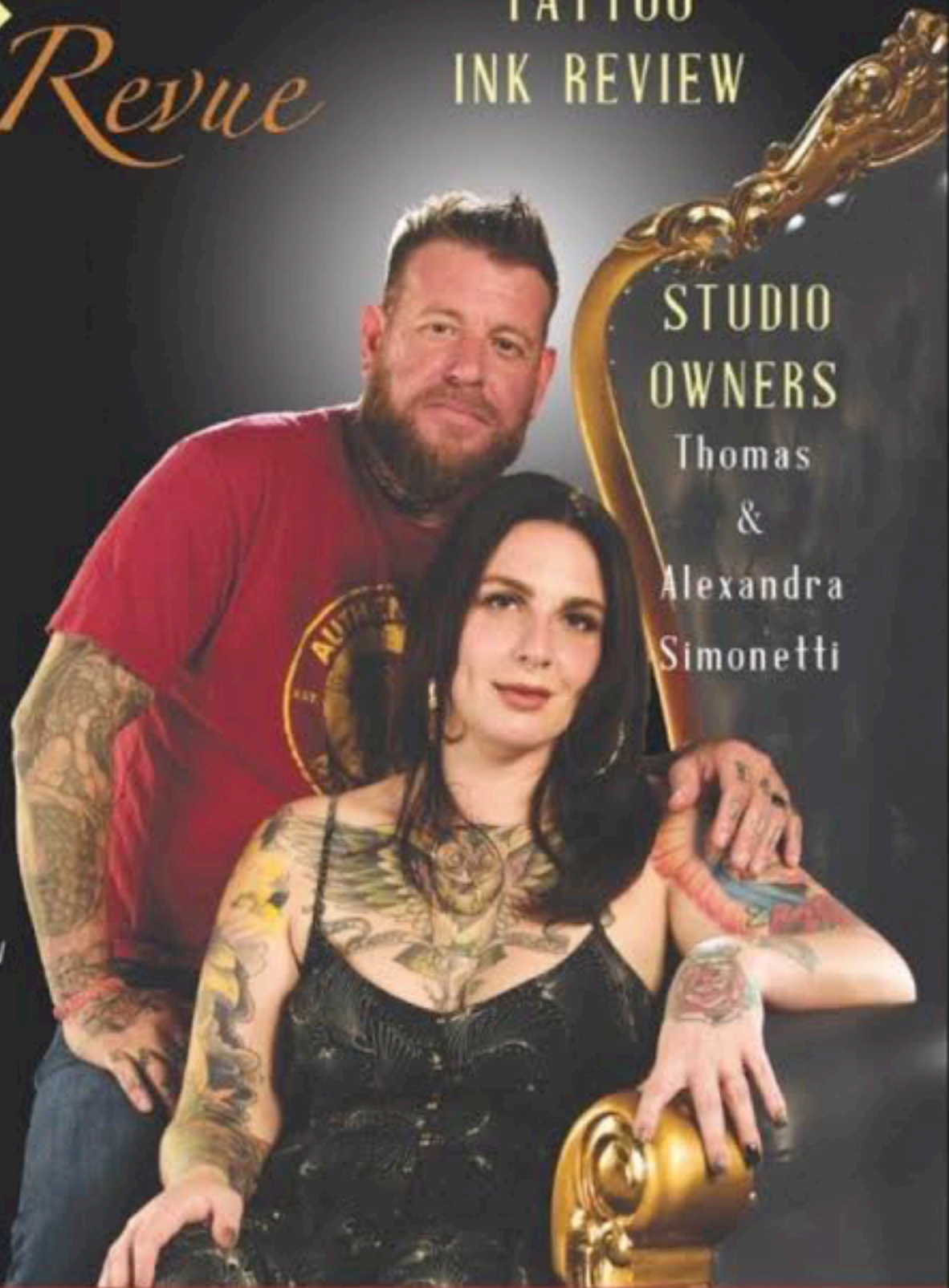
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-FAMILY, BUSINESS & PASSION-

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TOMMY SIMONETTI*Interview By Jim Tamburino*

The simple path was taking the safe route maintaining his construction company at twenty-one- years-old. No matter the age though, construction is never easy. Neither is creating your own business from the ground up and successfully managing it and prospering on a consistent basis. Holbrook, Long Island native, Tommy Simonetti, now 43, did just that. Eventually, he even followed the road of his passion which was not only an easy decision but a more rewarding result in the end.

Exchanging his work boots for the chair and needle full-time is the best decision he made. The chair is where he belongs. It is what drives him every single day. It's also what provides a successful living for him and his family - his wife Alexandra, their sixteen-year-old twin boys, Brandon and Ethan, and eight-year-old son, Tristen.

Seventeen-plus years of tattooing professionally has provided an abundance of experience while working at various reputable Long Island locations. While his craft's portfolio includes all styles, Simonetti has built a clientele ranging from musicians, law enforcement and even other tattooers in the industry. The highlighted resume eventually led to another creation of his own business. This time though, he went all-in on the love he has for the craft and launched his own shop. Located in Smithtown, NY, Authentic Arts Tattoo was a 750 square foot space that opened its doors in February of 2012. Within three years, a studio in Amsterdam was launched and just over a year ago, the Smithtown location remained in the same strip mall shopping center but reopened in a space that is double the size. Throughout the process, Simonetti has also had the opportunity to travel the nation and showcase his artistic tattooing skills at numerous conventions, all the while putting his construction days and former successful company behind him.

Today, the Smithtown shop is buzzing. A staff member notifies Simonetti that I have arrived, and within minutes, he greets me at the main entrance. We exchange a handshake; perhaps an awkward one as both of us are not exactly sure how to greet one another during this time of social distancing. From the cusp though, he is cool. Dressed in blue jeans and Vans-type shoes, his red t-shirt shows off his tatted sleeves. His reddish hair is slightly combed over his shaved sides, leading into his studded earrings and thick beard and mustache. He's all smiles when he welcomes





me in and steps on through the waist-high wooden swinging saloon door that squeaks as he enters. I follow directly behind him as we walk through the action towards his office in the back portion of the shop.

I can't help but notice Adam Lazarra's vocals chillingly pleading, "I'm coming over but it never was enough" over the melting breakdown of Taking Back Sunday's A Decade Under The Influence blaring from the speakers. The members of the heavy-weight rock band hail from nearby Long Island towns just a short driving distance from Simonetti's home away from home. The rock. The punk-rock. The music alone sets the vibe, for sure. More importantly, the colors pop from the detailed crafted artwork comprised of framed designs and skateboard decks that decorate the shop's beige painted walls.

As he leads us through the action, multiple masked tattooers work from their leather chairs, focusing on customers sprawled out in their chair beds. The well-oiled machine is sleek, spotless and in full motion - even during society's current pandemic situation. The atmosphere bleeds of old-school roots blended with the modern cleanliness, design, operation and safety.

Settling into a seat in the quiet office, I can't help but to notice an 8x11 sheet of paper tacked on a wall. I rise to take a closer look at the black sharpie handwritten statement that fills the page. Although some of the words are abbreviated, an excerpt from the passage reads, "As a studio was created to one of the shops we all talked about. Where 95% stress FREE. People had one common goal and was to grow and learn from each other. That means artist and customer alike. A place where we as people can succeed and flourish as humans!"

"That's the original mission statement I wrote and hung up on the first day we opened our first shop," Tommy explains. With The Get Up Kids frontman Matt Pryor now serenading the chorus of Close To Home in the background, I catch a few more details of the surroundings before settling back down into my seat. The artwork. The music. The people. Simonetti's laid back and comfortable personality. The entire vibe. I'm ready to dig in but not before Simonetti jokingly claims,

"I'm pretty boring, man."

WHAT DOES TATTOOING MEAN TO YOU?

(A deep inhale and exhale). Everything, really. Pretty much life. You know, the whole cliché, "You don't know where you'd be if you weren't doing this." The truth is, I don't know where I'd be. I started later in my life. I was twenty-six. I wasn't eighteen

out of the gate. I had a really good job before I started tattooing. I owned a construction company. I didn't need to tattoo. I hung out in a tattoo shop. I pretty much grew up in one. I got tattooed. Had a ton of tattoos before I was an actual tattooer. My buddy, John Carroll, his picture is hanging in the front. One day, he was like, "Why don't you do this?" And, as soon as I did it, that was it. I was hooked. As soon as I touched someone with a needle, I was hooked. This was it. This is the shit. There's nothing more intimate than that. I hung out at the shop all the time. Like I said, I had a good job and it wasn't about money or anything like that. So, I bought a kit from Huck Spaulding and started. I don't know if you want to mention this, but I stared out of my house because you couldn't get an apprenticeship. It was too hard back then. There were twelve tattoo shops. It wasn't like now where there's over a hundred of them. As soon as I started, that was it. I fell in love with it. There was nothing. I mean, it was a lot of work. I never got apprenticed. To get to where I'm at, seventeen years later, I mean, it's hard. I guess a major reason why I love tattooing is because of the people. Meeting and talking to people. And finding out what they do for a living. Sharing conversations. Developing a friendship. To me, it's better than just painting on a canvas. I would never be just an artist. There's nothing wrong with that, but I want the personal interaction with whomever I work on. I want someone who maybe we can feed off each other. Maybe if I'm having a shitty day or they're having a shitty day, hopefully I can make him or her feel better today. That's what keeps me going and drives me into it. The tattoo and the person takes the mind off of life.

TAKE US BACK A BIT AND DESCRIBE THE FIRST TIME YOU TATTOOED SOMEONE.

The very first time was myself. I got my kit. I was like, "Fuck it. If I'm going to tattoo someone, I'm going to tattoo myself first." I wanted to know what's what. And let me tell you, it looks like shit. You know, I apprenticed a bunch of our tattooers in here, Jay and Amanda, a few others, and they're all unbelievable. They're awesome. But I stand by the belief that when you're first starting out, don't ever subject someone to something that you're not willing to subject yourself to. Does that make sense? My second tattoo was my brother. I tattooed his foot. It was old-school. A JD Cross Skull but I put flames around the back of it. So, needless to say, he has a black foot now. An entirely black foot.

IS THERE ONE SPECIFIC TATTOO THAT YOU HAVE GIVEN SOMEONE THAT STANDS OUT AS A FAVORITE?

As much as people would want to hear a cool answer, this may sound corny or whatever, but all of them. I don't focus on one specific type or style. I focus on just the tattoo itself. Oriental, an American version. But traditional is cool too. And then you have black and grey, which is killer. Everything's cool. Why pigeon-hole yourself? So, there isn't one favorite. And then it even goes into the whole conversation about the pinterest tattoo. Honestly, I think those are cool too. It's a fucking tattoo. You're getting a tattoo because you want a tattoo. Who am I to judge whether it's trendy or not? You know? That's for that person to decide. So, I think all tattoos are cool. That's why we get tattoos, right?

EXPLAIN YOUR PROCESS OF TATTOOING FROM DESIGN TO TATTOO.

This is going to be great. So much fun... The truth is, I wing it. Straight up. I talk to you. We shoot the shit. I feel like it's 50% me and 50% you, you know? I'm not one of those guys where you come in and want a heart, and I draw a heart, and you don't like the heart, and I'm like, "Well, that's what you're getting." No way. It's 50% me and 50% you. But I try to pull as much out of your brain as possible. I don't draw anything until that day. Right now for example, I'm booked up until mid-October. Some people ask, "Are you going to send me a drawing?" I won't draw anything until that day. I book 2-3 per day, I come in 2-3 hours before the shop opens and that's when I draw those tattoos. This way, I'm focused on those specific ones that day. We wing it. We draw it. If you like it, we do it. If you don't like it, we change it. But most of the time, everyone likes it because I try to pull out so much information and ideas out of your head.



WHAT DO YOU LIKE AND DISLIKE ABOUT YOUR JOB AS A TATTOO ARTIST?

I don't have to wear a suit and tie to work every day. There's no human resources. You can be as politically and un-politically correct as you want to be. What I dislike about it? Okay, what I don't like about this industry is the fact that a tattooer has less control of how the client acts or reacts. And that's because of the internet. A lot of people, us included, walk on eggshells a little bit because you don't want someone to write a bad review about you. Where, ten years ago, if you just came in and acted like an asshole, we could simply just say, "Leave. Go." Without an attitude, or a "tattitude" I call it. Now, today, you sort of have to deal with it and put up with it all because you don't want someone to write a bad review. That's the one thing I can't stand in this business. Social media and the internet are so powerful, even for the positives of our business. It got the industry to where it is now and I love that. And it's only going to continue to keep growing, which I love, but the double-edge sword is that. You watch every little move you make and you're losing control. You're underneath a microscope.

WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING AND REWARDING ASPECT OF BEING A TATTOO ARTIST?

Every tattoo. Every tattoo is challenging. I don't give a shit what anyone says. They're all challenging because you're a human being, right? We're all human beings. We all have shit going on in our lives. And some people have more than others. Like right now, I have a killer headache. Right? And I have to do a tattoo right after this. So, you need to put that shit aside. And that's the challenging part – taking whatever depression you have that day, whatever little bullshit that goes on in your life, or big bullshit, and put it aside. The average person gets what? One tattoo every two years or so? And that person comes in and you need to be 100% ready to give your best to that person. It's not like you're making an egg sandwich in the deli and you forget the cheese, and you can just slap the cheese back on. To be focused. Not that being focused is challenging for me. Does that make sense? But you have to be. You have to have your shit together. There's no room to fuck up. And then when things are going haywire, you need to be able to calm down and really zone in. Now, the most rewarding thing about this, honestly, cheesy answers or not, is when the person is happy. Seriously. I don't care if I do a back-piece or a small tattoo and it's your grandmother's name in your grandmother's handwriting and I could have done it with my left hand. On a serious note, when the person's happy, that's what it's about. Otherwise, why the fuck are you doing this? Just paint on a canvas then.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER SOMEONE CONSIDERING THIS CAREER?

Considering this as a career? Ohh! Ohh! You're fucking lucky. You're going to be spoiled. First off, you do research. You have to get in a good shop. A shop that knows what they're doing. There are so many tattoo shops now, which means there are more shops that don't know what they're doing and less shops that know what they're doing. If someone walks in here looking to be apprenticed, the first thing I ask is, "Why did you come here?" If they just say, "I was driving down the block and popped in..." With a blank stare, I'm just like, "No way." Second, you better have some thick skin, boy. Some thick skin. Because when you do get in with that shop, they're not going to do it just so you can pay them or clean the floors. They're going to ride your ass. I mean, you learn this and you get something that you can literally travel the world with for the rest of your life. You can do this anywhere you want to. So, yeah. Know what shop you want to go into, have some thick-ass skin and you must get tattooed. Find something you like, find the right shop, get tattooed and make yourself present. Continuously. Show up every day and want a tattoo. Amanda, who works here, is a cousin of my friend. She was an artist who was interested in learning more about painting and I told her to come down. Her first day, I was like,



"This isn't an apprenticeship. But we'll show you some things." She continuously showed up and hung out any chance she could. Two years later, I was like, "You're still here." She's been here ever since. It's all about persistence. Like anything in life. If you want to do something, you learn from someone really good, if not the best, at what it is you want to do. You better have that thick skin because you're going to fail and people are going to shit all over you and you just have to keep moving.



WALK US THROUGH YOUR DAILY ROUTINE OR A DAY IN THE LIFE OF TOMMY SIMONETTI.

I wake up at 6:30 A.M. I try to hang out by myself for a little bit before my youngest son wakes up. I clear my head a bit. Have a cup of coffee. Sit outside. Meditate for 20-30 minutes. Then my eight-year-old wakes up and it's party time. He gets going and it's non-stop. One of my other boys plays football. So, like this morning, I take him to practice. I usually arrive at the shop by 10 A.M. Sometimes 9:30. I start drawing and get those done as quickly as possible. I try to answer as many emails as humanly possible. My wife does a phenomenal job. She handles a lot of that – emails, responses, social media. The both of us take care of emails, personal DMs, the shop's DMs. All interaction. The shop closes at 10 P.M. but I'm usually here until 10:30-11. Go home, have a beer, get to bed, wake up at 6 A.M. and do it all over again. It's a pretty packed day. And, I love it.

TELL US YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE LONG ISLAND TATTOO INDUSTRY SCENE.

You know, who am I to judge? The more, the merrier. As long as you're doing the right thing. I mean, that's a question or topic where some people will be like, "There's too many. Bah, Bah, Bah! This guy sucks. That guys sucks." Who am I to say any of that? I was some dumbass who started in my basement. It is what it is. It all weeds itself out, especially right now. It's a hot-bed right now. Everyone's getting tattooed. I would like to see what's going to happen in the spring, you know what I mean? Not to get into the whole political thing, but especially if there's so many people still unemployed. It's just like everything else. It will weed itself out.

SO, DURING THIS PANDEMIC SITUATION, BUSINESS ACTUALLY BECAME BUSIER?

I don't know for certain but I would like to think so. Without sounding on a conceited level, I would like to think we are one of the busier shops around. Before this, we stay busy pretty much all year long. There's no off-season for us. We're pretty good with the way we've grown and the way we pushed. I'm extremely fortunate to be surrounded by the people that work here. But this whole Covid thing, it just consolidated it. Everyone is like, "I want it now," you know. And a lot of shops aren't taking walk-ins. I don't understand why. Listen, I may do big tattoos or what people call "custom", but I'm a walk-in tattooer. That's why I draw the morning of. It's like a walk-in. I may draw your back-piece the morning or day before but, for the most part, I'm drawing that day. Does that make sense? I don't understand why you can't do walk-ins or how you can just turn them away. And going back to what I said earlier, who the fuck knows what's going to happen? I'm an old-school tattooer in the fact that, "You want to get tattooed, you get tattooed now." Make it now. Do it now. This current situation definitely consolidated it and pushed everyone. So many people are coming in and doing it now instead of spreading things



out more.

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY? WILL IT CONTINUE TO GROW?

Consumption is going up and it's always going to go up. More and more people are getting tattoos every single day. There's a good saying that I always live by: "Every day someone turns eighteen." Especially with social media and especially with the T.V. shows. I don't know how popular those shows are anymore but they definitely did blow the industry up. Social media wasn't this prevalent 10-15 years ago. I think it's definitely going to keep going and going and going. Now, on a different level, where will tattooing be as far as values go? I'm not that old-school prick who is like, "You gotta know this and you gotta know that. And you gotta trace Sailor Jerry flash for two years." I mean, maybe that's right. I don't know. But you still should know where you came from. Your lineage. Without them? You know, the good 'ol saying is, "Without them, we wouldn't be doing it." Case in point. You have all these young cats around here, all freaking out that they were shut down for 3-4 months. Do any of them even know that tattooing was illegal in New York City back in the 1970's and 80's? Do they know that? This isn't the first time this shit has happened. It's the first time it happened like this, with a pandemic taking place. So, who's to say that they can never just end it? People should know that. You should know Spider Webb and how he sat on City Hall. Why are people shook? Don't get shook. Know your history.

HAVE ANY TECHNIQUES CHANGED SINCE YOU BEGAN YOUR CAREER?

Inks have definitely gotten better. I consider myself someone who started fairly recent. I have only been doing this for seventeen years. But when I first started, you were still making your own needles. There were some companies – TCM Worldwide. You could buy your needles but you made your own needles when you started out. The metal tubes. There weren't really any disposable tubes. Tiny grips. These machines now! I use a Dan Kubin machine. This thing is fucking insane. It's nuts. It's so light. We have to give him a shoutout – Dan Kubin! So, things have gotten better. But it's still the same principles. Yeah, there are battery packs now but it's still hand to skin. The needles may be better or they may be configured better. I don't have to spend an hour making them when I could be drawing something, which is much better today. But it's still pretty much the same exact process. That will never change. At least I don't think so.

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE TATTOO ARTIST?

Oh! Filip Leu. No hesitation. Filip Leu is insane. He was one of the reasons why I was convinced to do this. My buddy, John, just got a tattoo by Filip Leu. Wait, back up a second. I worked for Cliff's Tattoo for eight years. I love Cliff. Super dude. Before I started tattooing, Cliff used to have Paul Booth come to the custom shop back there. And Filip Leu. John got a tattoo from Filip Leu, and like I said, I wasn't tattooing at this point. I was just hanging out. The beginning stages of that persistence I spoke about earlier. I saw this skull on his chest and I was blown away. It was so fucking readable and perfect. Ever since then I was like, "That's the shit." This guy is unbelievable. And then you talk to him and he's one of the most humble dudes ever. Just chill and relaxed. And you know, there's a ton of other guys who are all amazing too. Steve Moore is insane. Jeff Gogue. All these new dudes popping up and they're becoming more and more insane as they go. They're all incredible. But for me, Filip Leu is definitely the man. Then, I have a shrine of Charlie Wagner. He came from the Bowery. That dude is like a God in my eyes. Because, once again, I would not be here if it wasn't for him.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE MOMENT OF YOUR CAREER?



No, I don't have a favorite moment. Like I said, pretty cliché. Every moment is cool. I guess if I had to choose one though, it was when we opened up the shop. That was pretty sick. That was wild. 2012. I wrote that mission statement of the shop on a piece of paper. I always kept it right here on the wall in this office. But honestly, I'm pretty cheesy because every day is special. It's cool. You know, I used to own a construction company at 21 years-old. And days in here, when either a customer may give me a hard time or someone is busting my chops, or I'm stressed about all the emails I need to go through, I look outside and see snowfall on a cold winter day, or it's blistering hot outside in the summer and I'm like, "Damn. I could be out on a roof right now." So, yeah, there's no shining moment. I won trophies and shit like that. But none of that really gets me too excited. Hence, is why, no offense, even something like doing this interview. It's not that I'm not appreciative for it but it's just not my thing. Doing a tattoo for someone after this – doing a good job and seeing him or her pumped is it for me. That is everything for me. There's another saying, "The longest line wins." That's what drives me.



WALK US THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF SEEING A TATTOO GETTING DONE FOR THE FIRST TIME.

That's what hooked me. I was still in high school. Sixteen-years-old. We went to this party. It was on Hawkins Avenue. It was at an apartment and was so shady. But you could do this back then. You couldn't now. There was this apartment above a gas station. There were a ton of kids from high school hanging out. There had to be like fifty kids there. So, we go in and all of a sudden, I hear this buzzing noise. My buddy, Kenny, was with me. I walked into this bedroom and there was this dude, Adam Schneider, who I knew, and this other dude, who I didn't know. He was sitting there and he was tattooing him. It was a tribal band around his arm. That was before I met my buddy, John – before I really knew much about tattoos. I stood there in that bedroom, right across from them. I must have looked like a creep, just staring at him giving Adam a tattoo. I remember being like, "Holy shit. That is the coolest fucking thing I have ever seen in my life." Then I used to go to Danny Derosa's shop, Smoking Gun, which was on Railroad Ave. It was like a biker tattoo parlor. I would just walk in there. He used to kick us out. I would go back in. He'd kick us out. But that's how I really found my love for this.



LET'S DIVE INTO A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT YOU. TELL US ABOUT SOME OF YOUR HOBBIES.

(Laughs) I told you, I'm boring. I'm here seven days a week, man. Well, not seven. Now, I'm here six. I used to work five. I hang out with my kids, my wife. She's a piercer here and she's doing a killer job. I don't know shit about piercing but they sell all this high-end jewelry. So, she's here when I'm not and I'm home watching Tristen. I try to hang out with my family as much as possible because we don't get to see each other too much. I'd like to start surfing again. And my wife, she just bought me a motorcycle. Nothing like getting the juices flowing and going 85 MPH to work in the morning.

HOW ABOUT YOUR FAVORITE FOOD?

Is there anything other than pizza? Pizza to me... You should put this in there because everyone needs to know this shit. Pizza to me, it's not even a food. It's a dessert. I don't eat red meat. I eat chicken. But I don't eat red meat. I can eat a meal and then go eat a pizza afterwards. It's my dessert.



MOVIES?

You know, the cult classics. Reservoir Dogs. Pulp Fiction. Natural Born Killers. All of those classics.

HOW MANY TATTOOS DO YOU HAVE?

I don't count tattoos. I count body parts.
(points to different body parts)

So, I have one... two... three... It's easier for me to tell you the spots I don't have tattooed. I don't have anything on my right foot. I don't have anything on my right thigh or the side of my neck. But everything else is done.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST TATTOO?

(Laughs) Oh, God. I knew that was coming. It was corny. A tribal sun in between my shoulder blades. How 2001 is that? I was eighteen. My Mom didn't care. She was cool. My Dad doesn't have any tattoos. He's not into them. But he doesn't care. He's not the judgmental type of dude. But I still think he's like, "Why?" My Mom was super cool and just wanted me to wait until I was eighteen. But when I got the fourth or fifth tattoo, and I was only nineteen by then, she was like, "Dude, slow down!" I couldn't though. Once I got hit, that was it. I'm covered now. There's no other object to me. It's a full suit.

TO SUM UP YOUR PASSION FOR WHAT YOU DO AND THE SUCCESS OF YOUR SHOP, SHARE YOUR LAST THOUGHTS ON EVERYTHING YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED SO FAR.

You know, for us, in the beginning, back in 2012, we weren't in this studio. We were in the same shopping center but it was only 750 square feet. It was me, two other tattooers and my wife who was the piercer. There was only four of us. It was so tiny. Within three years, we opened up a studio in Amsterdam. Then, just over a year ago, this shop here, which is double the size with eight tattooers, two piercers and a front girl. So, we keep growing and growing, which is great because I want to keep everyone here. It tells me we're making people happy. These people here – these guys are phenomenal. I wouldn't be able to do this without any one of them. I have so much respect for everyone here. It's like that whole self-made thing. I hate that. I fucking hate that. You're not self-made. You need help. I need help. And these guys here are unreal to work with. Everyone in here rocks. This isn't "Tommy's Tattoos". If it wasn't for everybody in here, this place wouldn't be what it is. There's no way.

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